Want to defeat a proposed public policy? Just label supporters as 'extreme'

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New research shows how support for a generally liked policy can be significantly lowered, simply by associating it with a group seen as "radical" or "extreme."

In one experiment, researchers found that people expressed higher levels of support for a gender equality policy when the supporters were not specified than when the exact same policy was attributed to "radical feminist" supporters.

These findings show why attacking political opponents as "extremists" is so popular – and so effective, said Thomas Nelson, co-author of the study and associate professor of political science at Ohio State University.

"The beauty of using this 'extremism' tactic is that you don't have to attack a popular value that you know most people support," Nelson said.

"You just have to say that, in this particular case, the supporters are going too far or are too extreme."

Nelson conducted the study with Joseph Lyons and Gregory Gwiasda, both former graduate students at Ohio State. The findings were published in a recent issue of the journal *Political Psychology*.

For the study, the researchers did several related experiments.

In one experiment, 233 undergraduate students were asked to read and comment on an essay that they were told appeared on a blog. The blog entry discussed the controversy concerning the Augusta National Golf Club's "men only" membership policy. The policy caused a controversy in 2003 before the club hosted the Masters Tournament.

Participants read one of three versions of an essay which argued that the PGA Tour should move the Masters Tournament if the club refused to change this policy.

One group read that the proposal to move the tournament was led simply by "people" and "citizens." Another group read that the proposal was led by "feminists." The third group read that the proposal was led by "radical feminists," "militant feminists," and "extremists." Additional language reinforced the extremist portrayals by describing extreme positions that the groups allegedly held on other issues, such as getting rid of separate locker room and restroom facilities for men and women.

Participants were then asked to rate how much they supported Augusta changing its membership rules to allow women members, whether they supported the Masters tournament changing its location, and whether, if they were a member, they would vote to support female membership at the club.

The findings showed that participants were more supportive of the golf club and its rules banning women when the proposal to move the tournament was attributed to "radical feminists." They were also less likely to support moving the tournament, and less likely to support female membership.

"All three groups in the study read the exact same policy proposals. But those who read that the policy was supported by 'radical feminists' were significantly less likely to support it than those who read it was supported

by 'feminists' or just 'citizens,'" Nelson said.

By associating a policy with unpopular groups, opponents are able to get people to lose some respect for the value it represents, like feminism or environmentalism, Nelson said.

The researchers were able to show that in a separate experiment. In this case, 116 participants read the same blog entry used in the previous experiment. Again, the blog entry supported proposals to allow women to join the golf club. One version simply attributed the proposal to citizens, while the other two attributed them to feminists or radical feminists.

Next, the subjects ranked four values in order of their importance as they thought about the issue of allowing women to join the club: upholding the honor and prestige of the Masters golf tournament; freedom of private groups to set up their own rules; equal opportunities for both men and women; and maintaining high standards of service for members of private clubs.

How people felt about the relative importance of these values depended on what version of the essay they read.

Of those participants who read the proposal attributed simply to citizens, 42 percent rated equality above the other three values. But only 32 percent who read the same proposal attributed to extremists thought equality was the top value.

On the other hand, 41 percent rated group freedom as the top value when they read the proposal attributed to citizens. But 52 percent gave freedom the top ranking when they read the proposal attributed to extremists.

"Tying the proposal to feminist extremists directly affected the relative priority people put on gender equality vs. group freedom, which in turn affected how they felt about this specific policy," Nelson said.

"Perhaps thinking about some of the radical groups that support gender equality made some people lose respect for that value in this case."

This tactic of attacking a policy by tying it to supposedly extremist supporters goes on all the time in politics, Nelson said.

For example, foes of President Obama's health-care reform initiative attacked the policy by calling Obama a "socialist" and comparing the president to Adolf Hitler.

These tactics can work when people are faced with competing values and are unsure what their priorities should be, Nelson said.

Environmental values, for example, may sometimes conflict with economic values if clean air or clean water laws make it more difficult for companies to earn a profit.

"If you want to fight against a proposed environmental law, you can't publicly say you're against protecting the environment, because that puts you in the position of fighting a popular value," Nelson said.

"So instead, you say that proponents of the proposed law are going to extremes, and are taking the value too far."

One problem with this tactic for society, though, is that it can hurt support of the underlying values, as well as the specific policy.

"If you use this extremism language, it can make people place less of a priority on the underlying value. People may become less likely to think

environmentalism or gender equality are important values."

Provided by The Ohio State University